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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether using literature circles in the study of non-fiction improved student attitudes about reading and improved comprehension while developing self-confidence and cooperation. A purposeful sample of five students from a combined grade 5/6 class were chosen based on their negative responses about attitude and ability regarding reading. Subjects completed surveys before and after a four-week intervention. Results indicated that in the literature circles, students were able to enhance reading skills, learn from each other, gain self-confidence, improve oral and written communication, discover important themes that run through literature, and have fun in a socially interactive environment. Students were observably more enthusiastic, attentive, and responsible for their own learning in this setting. Educators should keep trying to improve student learning through strategies such as literature circles, allowing students to learn from one another, take responsibility, and develop into independent lifelong learners. A reading interest survey and a literature circle evaluation form are attached. (RS)

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LITERATURE CIRCLES

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Applied Research

Marge Pitman

EDEL 625
Advanced Analysis of Instruction
Through Reflective Strategies

April 29, 1997

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....p. 1-2

Statement of the Hypothesis.....p. 3-4

Population/Sample.....p. 5-7

Research Design.....p. 8-11

Results.....p. 12-15

Conclusions.....p. 16

Recommendations.....p. 17-18

Appendix

Introduction

"They never stop talking!" This complaint is the one heard most often in the Danbrook teacher lounge, followed by a chorus of sympathetic "amens" and nodding heads. After many years of teaching, I decided to stop fighting the social nature of children and incorporate strategies that used their natural tendencies to my advantage. Cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and paired reading became the norm in Room 10, so when I became acquainted with the idea of literature circles, it seemed a natural addition to my repertoire of strategies designed mainly to meet the goals of the English/Language Arts Framework (1987).

This is the third year of our district focus on literacy. With reading as a main goal for all students, we are diagnosing, remediating, and reducing class sizes for the sake of teaching students to read, yet trying to retain a quality literature base. Literature circles allow children to apply their natural socializing tendencies in a productive manner, making learning meaningful and hopefully internalized for additional future learning.

Literature circles are small (usually 4-6) temporary groups of students studying the same piece of literature (Peterson & Eeds, 1991), or in some cases studying a common theme or author (Noll, 1994). During their meetings, they read, discuss, and write about their common novel, author, or theme, after which they choose an activity that will demonstrate their application of learning.

In my research, I discovered that one of the theories upon which literature circles is built is Vygotsky's (1978) belief that true learning first occurs on a social level where content becomes meaningful and personally relevant. His "zone of proximal development" theory states that: 1) learners accomplish more through the assistance of a " more knowledgeable other" than alone, and 2) there should be a transference of control from the "more knowledgeable other" to the learner through modeling and scaffolding.

It is my intention to study literature circles as a vehicle for the development of literacy in the classroom, whether in the area of English/Language Arts, History/Social Science, Health, or Science. If students have more positive attitudes and a personal connection to learning, it seems likely that the concepts taught will be retained and applied in future learning.

Statement of the Hypothesis

Every child a reader! The goal of California schools is to ensure that every child has the ability to read by the third grade. We've heard every reason why it can't be done: language, parent neglect, transiency, drugs, gangs, inexperienced/unqualified teachers, lack of money, etc. Danbrook Elementary in Anaheim is typical of thousands of schools where these reasons not to succeed exist.

All we can do is work with what we have--- students with a wide range of academic abilities, who come to us with diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. They do, however, have one thing in common....they love to talk! Why not use this to our advantage? Of course, letting them talk without structure or purpose is called "recess", but used in the proper context, it can be our most powerful teaching tool.

While researching literature circles, I thought about my particular class this year and how they love to share ideas, role-play, and just talk---about anything and everything. This year I have planned lessons using oral language strategies in as many content areas as possible.

Literature circles are implemented to promote meaningful discussion, cooperation, and synthesis of ideas to create new learning.

In the following study I will attempt to prove the hypothesis:

Using literature circles in the study of non-fiction will improve student attitudes about reading and improve comprehension, while developing self-confidence and cooperation.

Population/Sample

Population

After administering a survey, I will select a purposeful sample from my 5/6 combination class , choosing only students who respond negatively to questions about attitude and ability regarding reading.

To better understand the class composition, I have identified factors that may influence attitude and/or ability:

- 23 6th graders, 6 fifth graders
- 16 girls, 13 boys
- 1 resource
- 5 limited English speaking, 8 fluent English speaking
- 6 identified gifted/ high achieving
- 20 free lunch, 3 reduced lunch
- 8 Title I (below 36%ile ITBS Reading)

Population Sample

Having administered the Reading Interest Inventory (Appendix A), I selected my sample from those who might not have positive attitudes or self-confidence in their reading ability.

One student who had left and two who had entered the class during the four-week study were eliminated, leaving a pool of 26 students, three of whom had been absent during the pretest or posttest time. Now down to 23 students, I chose five:

- A: 5th grade boy, fluent English speaking (Spanish home language), identified high achiever in gifted program, receives free lunch, two-parent family, natural leader.

- B: 5th grade girl, limited English speaking (Spanish home language), high/average achiever, receives free lunch, two-parent family, shy but determined.

- C: 6th grade boy, fluent English speaking (Spanish home language), high potential, high/average achiever, receives free lunch, two-parent family, artistic, mature.

-D: 6th grade boy, fluent English speaking (Spanish home language), low/average achiever, receives free lunch, lives with mother and older brother, quiet, conscientious.

- E: 5th grade girl, fluent English speaking (Spanish home language), high achiever, receives free lunch, lives with mother and 3 younger siblings, articulate, artistic, mature.

These five students had somewhat negative answers to questions that dealt with their attitudes about reading or their perceived ability to read. I will compare their initial survey to the post-survey, looking for among other things changes in attitude and confidence in their abilities.

Research Design

Classroom Plan

The literature circles will be formed as cooperative groups, with the common themes of the student-selected biographies deciding group makeup. Students will be given direct instruction as to what is expected of them and how learning will take place and later evaluated. Students will review the basic expectations of cooperative groups (boundaries, limits).

In my classroom I plan to use a one group pretest posttest design, giving a survey at the beginning of the study, and readministering it at the end. From the initial survey, a purposeful sample will be selected and monitored through observation and student/ teacher journals, and assessed through the post-survey and teacher/ group evaluations. The four-week study is planned as follows:

Week 1: Administer survey.
Describe literature circles and their purpose.
Give book talks on preselected literature.

Review boundaries, rules for cooperative groups.
Monitor student selection of literature.
Help students form groups.
Instruct students on journal entries.

Week 2: Student groups to meet at least 3 times.
Give instruction in questioning; model appropriate questions and responses.

Week 3: Students to meet at least 3 times.
Continue to monitor, observe, and guide groups when necessary.
Give students choices for culminating activities.

Week 4: Students to meet at least 3 times.
Groups present their finished individual or group projects.
Evaluation by teacher/students.
Administer post-survey.

After evaluating all surveys, those from the sample group will be compared to the initial survey, and the data recorded for this study.

Staff Plan

When my study is complete, the videotape used for my presentation will be used for a staff inservice, along with copies of information regarding literature circles. Since we are near the end of the school year, it will be geared towards implementation next fall. All staff will be invited (classified and certificated) and asked for their evaluations and suggestions.

We have nine new teachers at Danbrook this year, many of them inexperienced and open to suggestions. Next year we will have two more new teachers. I feel strongly that now is an important time for experienced teachers to step in and provide leadership in all areas, especially modeling successful strategies for new teachers.

Parent/Guardian Plan

I plan to talk to parents at our Open House, coming up soon in May. Using the videotape as a background, I hope to explain to parents how beneficial independent reading is for their children. They will also see how positive social interaction enhances the learning process

Instead of lecturing parents on the evils of television and video games, I hope to show them through the video and student projects how their children have developed academic and social skills through literature circle activities. If parents can see the value of reading, perhaps they will model this behavior themselves.

Parents and guests will be handed surveys where they will be asked for ideas regarding our districtwide literacy focus. They will also be asked to evaluate their impression of literary circles, and whether they would like further information as to reading strategies. Making reading tutors out of our parents is a definite goal for next year.

Results

Comparing the results of the final survey (see next page) to the initial survey, I found an overall slight improvement in the attitudes of the sample group. In the post-survey (#3), two students found reading to be more fun, two felt the same, and one felt it was less fun.

As to perceived reading ability (#10, #11), four felt better about comprehension and one felt the same; three felt better about their ability compared to others their age and two felt the same.

Looking at individuals, Student A seemed to gain confidence slightly as he likes reading in front of the class (#4, #12) much more. He also shows more interest in non-fiction material (#9). Shy Student B found that choosing her own books was preferable to having them teacher-selected (#6, #7) after being allowed to do so. She also demonstrated more confidence in her abilities (#11, #12). As students were given extended periods for reading alone or in pairs before meeting, Students C and D found reading alone very enjoyable (#1), however Student D still preferred reading in a small group (#2). High achiever Student E felt she had gained greatly in

Survey Statements

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
A	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	3
	3	3	3	5	3	3	3	3	4	4	5	5
B	3	4	5	2	5	5	2	4	5	3	2	4
	3	5	5	2	5	3	5	3	3	4	3	3
C	3	2	2	4	1	2	4	4	5	4	4	3
	5	2	3	3	1	2	4	4	4	5	4	3
D	3	2	2	1	4	1	5	2	3	3	3	1
	5	5	3	1	1	1	5	1	5	4	4	1
E	1	5	4	4	3	3	3	5	2	3	3	2
	2	5	3	2	2	2	3	5	2	5	3	2

Pretest/Posttest Results

comprehension (#10), yet felt she was only sometimes reading as well as others (#11).

One finding that surprised me was the fact that overall, students whose parents spoke little or no English at home were the students who felt the most inadequate about reading, even though most are succeeding at grade level or above. Only Student A, who is a high achiever in the gifted program, shows a sense of confidence in his survey. Students not in the sample group, achieving at lower levels, felt more confident in reading than these students.

There were several unexpected, but welcome benefits from this project. Working in cooperative groups, students were given roles to fulfill, such as "director", "manager", "writer",and "editor" (names they agreed upon as a class). While working, two groups decided that their members were ill-suited for the jobs they had chosen, democratically switched positions, and continued to work as if nothing had occurred. In another group, when a student was absent, the remaining members quickly divided his responsibility among themselves and carried on. Problem-solving at its finest!

A group assessment was given orally by each literary circle

and a group written evaluation (Appendix B) turned in. The students were very honest in their evaluations and generally rated themselves higher in cooperation and participation than in quality of work. In our next session, we hope to improve in that area.

Conclusions

In literature circles, students are able to enhance reading skills, learn from each other, gain self-confidence, improve oral and written communication, discover important themes that run through literature, and have fun in a socially interactive environment. Students are observably more enthusiastic, attentive, and responsible for their own learning in this setting.

When students find a personal connection to the material they have read through discussion with peers, the learning becomes meaningful and rewarding. Children are naturally sociable creatures, and literature circles seems a natural vehicle for motivating students to develop all communicative skills.

This project has been more of a learning experience for me than for my students. The lessons I have learned about personal connections students use to make learning meaningful will improve my teaching from now on.

I believe I have proved my hypothesis that the implementation of literature circles improves student attitudes toward reading, improves comprehension, and develops self-confidence and cooperation.

Recommendations

As we struggle to adapt to the growing needs of diverse student populations, teachers realize that they are often working much too hard and seeing too little progress. In literature circles, students learn to make choices, be responsible, and in a non-threatening, enjoyable atmosphere, learn from each other. Of course, the teacher must set the parameters, facilitate, and closely monitor, but the burden of trying to force knowledge upon an unwilling or inattentive student is lifted by allowing students to create their own knowledge in a carefully designed environment.

Implementing literature circles requires an investment of time and materials. Districts must be willing to allow teachers preparation time to plan properly, and budget for purchases of quality literature at appropriate reading levels.

Parents must be shown the value of independent reading and be willing to spend time discussing literature with their children. School sites must continue to offer assistance or training for parents who need help in this area, through parenting classes or evening workshops.

Educators must keep trying to improve student learning through strategies such as literature circles, allowing students to learn from one another, take responsibility, and develop into the independent lifelong learners we know they can become.

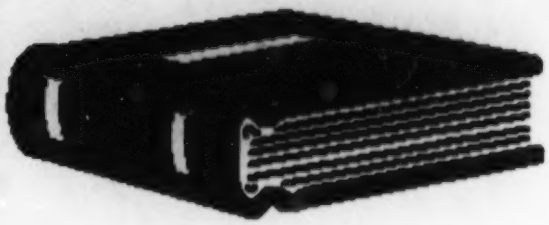
Appendix

Name_____Date_____

Reading Interest Inventory

Circle the number that most closely fits your feelings:
1=never 2=rarely 3=sometimes
4=usually 5=always

1.	I enjoy reading alone.	1 2 3 4 5
2.	I prefer reading in a small group.	1 2 3 4 5
3.	Reading is fun.	1 2 3 4 5
4.	I like reading aloud in front of the class.	1 2 3 4 5
5.	I enjoy being read to.	1 2 3 4 5
6.	I like the teacher choosing my books.	1 2 3 4 5
7.	I prefer to choose my own books.	1 2 3 4 5
8.	I like reading fiction best.	1 2 3 4 5
9.	I prefer non-fiction reading.	1 2 3 4 5
10.	I understand what I read.	1 2 3 4 5
11.	I can read as well as most students my age.	1 2 3 4 5
12.	I enjoy reading with the whole class.	1 2 3 4 5



LITERATURE CIRCLE EVALUATION

CIRCLE MEMBERS

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

This is how we rate ourselves: (Circle one)

1. Cooperation	Poor	O.K.	Good	Excellent
2. Project completion	Poor	O.K.	Good	Excellent
3. Quality of work	Poor	O.K.	Good	Excellent
4. Participation	Poor	O.K.	Good	Excellent
5. Use of class time	Poor	O.K.	Good	Excellent
6. Comprehension	Poor	O.K.	Good	Excellent

We feel the best thing about working in literature circles is_____

_____ because_____

_____.